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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000822

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP, G/TIP, AND DRL
DEPARTMENT OF LABOR FOR JAMES RUDE

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KCRM](#) [KWMN](#) [SMIG](#) [ELAB](#) [KMPI](#) [MU](#)
SUBJECT: TIP GETS NEGATIVE PRESS COVERAGE; GOVERNMENT
MAKING PROGRESS

REF: A. MUSCAT 734

[1](#)B. MUSCAT 778
[1](#)C. MUSCAT 651

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo, reasons 1.4 b/d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Throughout the summer, Oman's press has given negative coverage to the 2007 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report and Oman's Tier 3 designation, with multiple articles questioning the report's credibility and U.S. motives. Nevertheless, the government continues to make progress on improving its capacity to combat TIP, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) championing comprehensive anti-TIP legislation, and the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) considering new regulations to control and monitor the recruitment of foreign workers. The discrepancy between shock and anger expressed in public and the government's steady, yet quiet action suggests that the government may be trying to save face while attempting to fulfill the recommendations in the TIP action plan. End summary.

Behind the Negative Press...

[1](#)2. (U) Since mid-July 2007, Oman's private English- and Arabic-language papers have given extensive - and primarily negative - coverage to Oman's Tier 3 designation in the 2007 TIP report. Most articles defend Oman's record on human rights and express anger at what are characterized as baseless and speculative accusations of forced labor and commercial sexual exploitation in Oman. On August 26, the Arabic daily Al-Watan published interviews with expatriate laborers, including a Pakistani butcher, Chinese hairdresser, and several mid-level managers of private companies, who uniformly praised their treatment in Oman and the protections provided them by Oman's existing labor laws. Coverage also has called attention to trafficking in the United States, with two articles citing a 2006 United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime report on human trafficking that lists the U.S. as a destination country with a high level of reported trafficking cases, in order to question the "moral and political authority" of the U.S. to "pass public comment on Oman" (ref A).

[1](#)3. (U) While on balance the coverage has been critical, several pieces have questioned Omani labor practices and cited specific instances of abuse. Talib al-Dhbari, Secretary General of the Oman Journalists Association, wrote

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an editorial carried in Al-Watan on August 19 in which he called on Omanis to "act more responsibly regarding manpower

issues," and criticized those employers who "(take) advantage of expatriate workers." An August 6 article that appeared in the Times of Oman, one of two private English language papers, called for heightened public action and awareness to protect foreign laborers from abuse. As an example of such maltreatment, the article reported an incident in which an Omani sponsor locked seven expatriate workers in a house for four days before the Royal Oman Police (ROP) intervened and freed them. (Note: A diplomat at the Indian Embassy confirmed the incident. While the sponsor was forced to pay back wages and the costs of repatriation, the sponsor has not faced criminal charges to date, the diplomat said. End note.)

14. (U) In what they claimed was an attempt to allow the U.S. an opportunity to respond to criticism and answer public concerns and questions about the TIP report, Al-Watan and the English daily The Oman Tribune sent three reporters to interview the Ambassador on August 27. While the reporters' questions reflected both newspapers' previously critical reporting on TIP, the Ambassador was able to call attention to the global nature of the crime and the need for all governments - including Oman's - to take concerted efforts to combat it. Post will provide a full read out of the interview septel after it is published.

...Progress on Anti-TIP Legislation...

15. (C) Behind the press, contacts report that Oman is making steady progress toward fulfilling the TIP action plan, as well as taking additional steps not included in the report's recommendations. An interagency task force has completed a draft of comprehensive anti-trafficking legislation (ref B). The Director of the Under Secretary's Office at the MFA, Humaid al-Ma'ani, told poloff that lawyers in the Ministry of Legal Affairs have adopted most of the recommendations of an

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outside expert, with whom the MFA shared a draft of the law, in order to enhance the protections and services provided victims. Al-Ma'ani told poloff that the MFA plans to present the draft law at a workshop in late September for officials, lawyers and non-governmental organizations in order to win broad support before submitting the law to the Council of Ministers sometime later in the year.

...Changing the Sponsorship System...

16. (C) The MOM also has taken steps recently to combat trafficking. Shahswar al-Balushi, CEO of the Oman Society for Petroleum Services (OPAL) and informal advisor to Minister of Manpower Juma bin Ali al-Juma, told poloff that the Minister has identified domestic workers, as well as low-skilled laborers in the agricultural and construction sectors, as the groups most vulnerable to becoming trafficking victims and has decided to focus his Ministry's initial anti-TIP efforts on changing the way that these workers are recruited and brought into the country. The Minister has accepted the broad outlines of a proposal to establish a limited number of government-licensed, privately operated companies that would assume the responsibility of recruiting foreign workers to Oman based on market demand - a move, al-Balushi stated, that has the potential to change significantly Oman's sponsorship system (ref C).

...& Combating Abuses in Recruitment, Wages

17. (C) In addition, Minister Juma plans to institute regulations to hold foreign recruitment agencies accountable for how they recruit and process low-skilled workers coming to Oman, starting with domestic workers. Under the

Minister's plan, all foreign agencies under contract with one of Oman's proposed recruitment companies would have to provide domestic workers with cultural and Arabic language training, as well as functional training such as instruction in housekeeping and cooking, before the workers could depart for Oman. The Minister also is considering pushing for a minimum wage for domestic workers, a move that would become politically feasible, al-Balushi noted, once agencies begin to improve and standardize the skills of workers recruited to be maids. Al-Balushi continued that if the Minister's plan succeeds, the MOM likely would expand the regulations in a phased approach to cover workers in the agriculture and construction sectors.

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18. (C) It is exceptionally rare for Omanis to hear information critical of their country. Local media are more accustomed to reporting the country's otherwise commendable respect for human rights and rule of law, especially when compared with the records of Oman's neighbors. So, the Tier 3 ranking came as a major embarrassment for Oman, and top officials are feigning surprise. This is astonishing to Post given the dialogue, sometimes intense, that Post has had with the MFA and other ministries on the trafficking issue. The journalists who interviewed the Ambassador were surprised to hear that U.S. and Omani officials have been discussing TIP, including the need for Oman to move on multiple fronts, for the past two years.

19. (C) According to the MFA's al-Ma'ani, while Oman wants to get off Tier 3 - and is taking action to do so - it does not want to be seen as responding directly to U.S. pressure. Given that sentiment, it is likely that the government is using the press to gain face-saving cover on the issue of TIP before the release of new anti-trafficking legislation and going public with other actions. Allowing nominally independent papers to carry uncharacteristically caustic coverage of the issue also gives the government the appearance of a dignified distance from the criticism. Despite the obviously biased reporting, the media stories nevertheless raise public awareness of trafficking in Oman - a key objective of Post. In any event, the media coverage and government reaction suggest that the USG should proceed carefully in pressing Oman on TIP in order not to halt the momentum we clearly have helped to generate.
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